

UK approves plans for Chinese mega-embassy in London

LONDON: The UK government on Tuesday gave China the green light to build a “mega-embassy” in the heart of London eight years after Beijing bought the site, triggering fresh anger from residents and rights groups.

The 20,000-square-metre (235,000-square-foot) site is set to become the largest embassy complex in the UK by area, and one of the largest in the centre of a Western capital. But it could still face legal challenges and residents vowed to act.

Housing minister Steve Reed’s decision to grant planning permission came after several delays over national security concerns. There have also been protests by activists who fear the sprawling site could be used to spy on and harass dissidents.

Reed said the decision was now final, barring a successful challenge in court. A government spokesperson said intelligence agencies had helped to develop a “range of measures... to manage any risks”.

“Following extensive negotiations in recent months, the Chinese government has agreed to consolidate its seven current sites in London into one site, bringing clear security advantages,” the spokesperson said. Security minister Dan Jarvis said China would continue to pose national security threats.

But he said after “detailed consideration of all possible risks around this new embassy... I am assured that the UK’s national security is protected”. There was anger though among the MPs, local residents and campaigners who have opposed the plans.

The decision “means more interference, more influence operations and more intimidations of people like me”, said activist Chloe Chueng, from the Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation.—AFP

Australia toughens laws on guns, hate crimes

SYDNEY: Australia has enacted new laws for a national gun buyback, tighter background checks for gun licences and a crackdown on hate crimes in response to the country’s worst mass shooting in decades at a Jewish festival last month.

Two bills for stricter gun control and anti-hate measures passed the House of Representatives and Senate late on Tuesday during a special sitting of parliament. The gun control laws passed with the support of the Greens party despite opposition from the opposition conservative Liberal-National coalition. The anti-hate laws passed with support from the Liberal party. Introducing the gun reforms, Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke said individuals with “hate in their hearts and guns in their hands” carried out the December 14 attack at the famed Bondi Beach that killed 15 people.

“The tragic events at Bondi demand a comprehensive response from government,” Burke said. “As a government we must do everything we can to counter both the motivation and the method.”

The father and son gunmen allegedly behind the attack on Jewish Hanukkah celebrations used powerful firearms that were legally obtained, despite the son being previously examined by Australia’s spy agency.—Reuters



KYIV’s local government has installed tents in front of an apartment where residents can warm up, charge their devices, get hot drinks and psychological support.—Reuters

Almost half of Kyiv without power after Russian attack

Greenland row diverting focus from Ukraine war, says Zelensky

KYIV: An overnight Russian bombardment on Kyiv left thousands of residential buildings and parliament without heating and water in -14C temperatures on Tuesday, just as the Ukrainian capital was scrambling to restore vital utilities destroyed in earlier attacks.

The barrage of hundreds of drones and missiles, which targeted energy facilities across Ukraine, killed at least one 50-year-old man near Kyiv.

More than half a million people have evacuated from the capital this month, when Russia unleashed its strongest attack on the capital’s energy infrastructure in the war, the city’s mayor, Vitali Klitschko, said. Journalists in the capital heard air raid sirens and explosions as Ukrainian air defence systems responded to the drones and missiles.

Sheltering in a metro station in the centre of Kyiv, Marina

Sergienko, a 51-year-old accountant, said she thought the repeated Russian strikes, which have left millions in the cold and dark over recent weeks, had a clear purpose.

“To wear down the people, push things to some critical point so there’s no strength left, to break our resistance,” she said, taking cover alongside dozens of other Kyiv residents bundled in hats and coats.

Foreign Minister Andriy Sybiga lashed out at Russian President Vladimir Putin, saying: “War criminal Putin continues to wage a genocidal war against women, children and elderly.” He said Russian forces had targeted energy infrastructure overnight in at least seven regions, and urged Ukraine’s allies to bolster its air defence systems.

Zelensky worried

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said on Tuesday he was worried US President Donald Trump’s push to take Greenland could be diverting focus away from Russia’s invasion, now approaching its four-year mark.

Trump last week threatened European nations with tariffs of up

to 25 per cent for opposing his plans to acquire Greenland, drawing anger from Brussels and putting the Nato military alliance under unprecedented strain.

“I’m worried about any loss of focus during a full-scale war,” Zelensky told reporters.

He added that the dispute surrounding Greenland, a Danish autonomous territory, and the Ukraine war should not be seen as “interchangeable”. “We have a full-scale war, we have a specific aggressor, and we have specific victims,” he said.

He also called for Washington to engage in diplomacy with Europe. “I want very, very much America to hear Europe, to truly hear it in the format of diplomacy. I think that’s what will happen and I strongly believe there won’t be any major threats,” he said.

Zelensky suggested he would skip the ongoing World Economic Forum in Switzerland to deal with the aftermath of the strike. But he kept open the possibility of going to the gathering of world leaders in the ski resort of Davos if agreements with the United States on possible post-war economic and security support were ready to be signed.—AFP

Spain orders speed limit on rail line in wake of crash

ADAMUZ: Spain’s rail operator Adif ordered trains on the Madrid-Barcelona high-speed line to limit their speed on Tuesday on concerns about the track’s condition, two days after one of Europe’s deadliest train crashes on another line left at least 42 dead.

The country remains in shock after the first-ever fatal accident on the country’s extensive high-speed rail network, which occurred on Sunday evening near Adamuz in Cordoba province, about 360 km (223 miles) south of Madrid. Experts say a faulty rail joint may be key to determining the cause of the derailment that led to the collision between two trains.

Train drivers last year called on Adif to limit speeds due to their unease about deterioration on several of Spain’s high-speed lines, after it opened the network to private competition in 2020 to offer low-cost alternatives to state-run Renfe’s trains.

“We have detected and reported to all operators much more vibration and wear and tear on the infrastructure since the liberalisation and a 60% increase in traffic,” Diego Martin, general secretary of the Semaf drivers union, said.

Adif said it hoped to lift the speed limit on the line once its maintenance team had inspected two stretches totalling nearly 150 km where drivers have reported bumps on the tracks.

At the site of the crash near Adamuz, rescuers used heavy machinery overnight and in the early hours of Tuesday to level the ground and gain access to the worst-hit carriages as they sought to recover the remains of people still missing.

They aimed to use two cranes to lift the front carriages of the train belonging to the state-run Alvia service, which had plunged down a 4-metre (13 ft) embankment after the crash, and the rear carriages of the train operated by private consortium Iryo.

The collision occurred in rolling, olive-growing countryside in the foothills of a mountain range at a site only reachable by a single-track road, making it difficult for rescuers to gain access with heavy machinery.

One more body was found overnight within the wreck of the Iryo train, which had derailed, and another death was confirmed later on Tuesday raising the death toll to 42, authorities said.—Reuters

Chagos sovereignty not up for debate, Mauritius tells Trump

PORT LOUIS: Mauritius responded on Tuesday to US President Donald Trump’s criticism over a deal with Britain granting it sovereignty over the strategic Chagos Islands, saying the issue was no longer up for debate.

“The sovereignty of the Republic of Mauritius over the Chagos archipelago is already recognised without ambiguity under international law and should no longer be a subject for debate,” said Mauritian Attorney General Gavin Glover in a statement.

The Chagos agreement will see Britain hand the archipelago — some 2,000 kilometres (1,200 miles) northeast of Mauritius — to its former colony and pay to lease the US-UK military base there for a century.—AFP

Afghanistan’s hunger crisis worsened by winter, aid cuts

KABUL: In the dull glow of a single bulb lighting their tent on the outskirts of Kabul, Samiullah and his wife Bibi Rehana sit down to dry bread and tea, their only meal of the day, accompanied by their five children and three-month-old grandchild.

“We have reached a point where we are content with death,” said 55-year-old Samiullah, whose family, including two older sons aged 18 and 20 and their wives, is among the millions deported by neighbouring Iran and Pakistan in the past year.

“Day by day, things are getting worse,” he added, after their return to a war-torn nation where the United Nations’ World Food

Programme estimates 17 million battle acute hunger after massive cuts in international aid.

“Whatever happens to us has happened, but at least our children’s lives should be better.” He was one of the returned Afghans speaking before protests in Iran sparked a massive crackdown by the clerical establishment, killing more than 2,000 in ensuing violence.

Samiullah said his family went virtually overnight from its modest home in Iran to their makeshift tent, partially propped up by rocks and rubble, after a raid by Iranian authorities led to their arrests and then deportation. They salvaged a few belongings but were not able to

carry out all their savings, which would have carried them through the winter, Samiullah added. “Migrants who are newly returning to the country receive assistance as much as possible,” said Afghan administration spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid, in areas from transport to housing, healthcare and food.

It was impossible to eradicate poverty quickly in a country that suffered 40 years of conflict and the loss of all its revenue and resources, he added in a statement, despite an extensive rebuilding effort.

“Economic programmes take time and do not have an immediate impact on people’s lives.” The WFP says Iran and Pakistan have expelled

more than 2.5 million Afghans in massive repatriation programmes.

Tehran ramped up deportations last year amid a flurry of accusations that they were spying for Israel. Authorities blamed the expulsions on concerns about security and resources.

No income, no aid

As winter spreads across Afghanistan’s arid landscape, work opportunities have dried up, while the wave of returning Afghans has swelled the population by a tenth, said John Aylieff, the WFP’s country director. “Many of these Afghans were working in Iran and Pakistan and they were sending

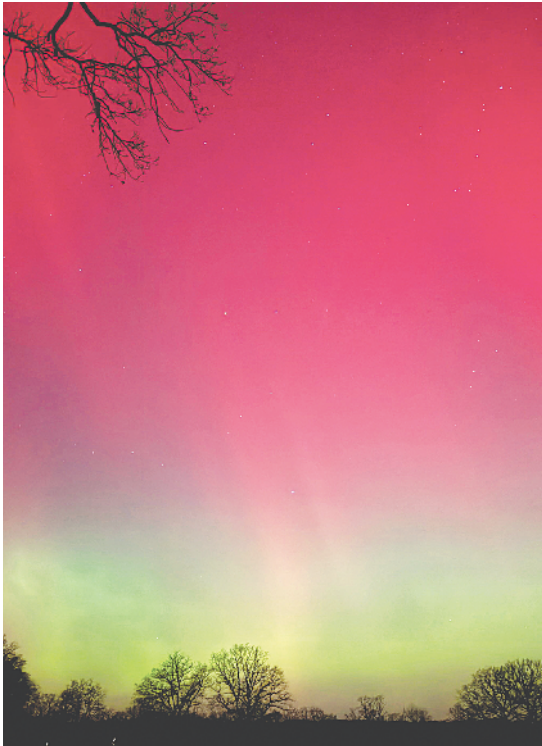
back remittances,” he said, adding that 3 million more people now face acute hunger. “Those remittances were a lifeline for Afghanistan.” Cuts to global programmes since US President Donald Trump returned to the White House have sapped the resources of organisations such as the WFP, while other donor countries have also scaled back, putting millions at risk worldwide.

“Last year was the biggest malnutrition surge ever recorded in Afghanistan and sadly the prediction is that it’s going to get worse,” added Aylieff, estimating that 200,000 more children would suffer acute malnourishment in 2026.

At the WFP’s aid distribution site

in Bamiyan, about 180 km (111 miles) from Kabul, the capital, are stacks of rice bags and jugs of palm oil, while wheelbarrows trundle in more food, but it is still too little for the long queues of people. “I am forced to manage the winter with these supplies; sometimes we eat, sometimes we don’t,” said Zahra Ahmadi, 50, a widowed mother of eight daughters, as she received aid for the first time.

At the Qasaba Clinic in the capital, mothers soothed their children during the wait for medicine and supplements. “Compared to the time when there were no migrants, the number of our patients has now doubled,” said Dr Rabia Rahimi Yadgari.—Reuters



THE aurora borealis illuminates the sky over Quickborn, Germany.—Reuters



DOHA: Seagulls and kites fly over the old seaport off the Qatari capital.—AFP

NEWSMAKERS



THE owner of a clothing store in Copenhagen shows a cap carrying the slogan “Make America Go Away”.—Reuters

‘Make America Go Away’ caps become symbol of defiance in Greenland standoff

COPENHAGEN: One Copenhagen clothing store’s tongue-in-cheek take on US President Donald Trump’s red baseball caps has become an unlikely symbol of Danish solidarity with Greenland, as protests mount over Trump’s demands to buy the vast self-governing territory.

The red caps resemble the “Make America Great Again” caps of Trump’s supporters but feature slogans like “Make America Go Away” and “Already Great”.

Store co-owner Michael said the caps had languished unsold for months before swiftly gaining popularity. “We only made one hundred to begin with,” said Michael, who declined to give his surname.

“When it went viral it was very, very popular.” Principal owner Jesper Rabe Tonnesen devised one of the caps’ slogans, “Nu det NUUK” — a Danish pun that sounds like “Nu det nok,” meaning “Now is enough,” but substitutes the “nok” with

“Nuuk,” the capital of Greenland.

“I thought, ‘How can you communicate in an easy way while putting your foot down?’” Tonnesen said, adding that he had distributed 300 caps by cargo bike at a protest held in Copenhagen on Saturday.

Tens of thousands of people rallied in Copenhagen and Nuuk at the weekend chanting “Greenland is not for sale” and marching to US diplomatic posts, many of them wearing the protest caps.

Trump says Greenland is vital to US security because of its strategic location and mineral deposits, and he has not ruled out using force to take control of the island. His threats have triggered a diplomatic crisis between the Nato allies.

“People have an urge to get out there with a message. We’ve just had enough and we’re fed up, sad and tired,” Tonnesen said.—Reuters



RIGA: People get food and warm drinks near a memorial during a remembrance ceremony for those who died fighting for Latvia’s independence from the former Soviet Union on Jan 20, 1991.—AFP



TWIN cannon anti-aircraft guns secure the alpine resort of Davos during the World Economic Forum.—AFP